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THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF SYRIA IN CENTERS OF MOSLEM AND CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE.

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I SET out on my travels in the summer of 1903 with the intention of visiting as many shrines as possible on the east side of the Sea of Galilee and in Cœlesyria (*Buqa*), but was prevented by the outbreak of cholera in the latter section from making the researches planned. On the other hand, I made special investigations at Nazareth, Haifa, Acre, Tyre, Sidon, Beirût, and the neighboring village of Juneh. It is the purpose of this article to give some of the results.

At the Fountain of the Virgin in Nazareth there is an evident identification of the Virgin as a *welî* with the Fountain of the Virgin. Both Moslems and Christians term the Virgin *en-Nasariyeh*, the feminine form signifying Nazarene. Moslem women vow to her a splotch of henna, while Christian women represent their vow by crosses of henna. Daubs and crosses are placed inside the arch, as may be seen from any clear photograph.

The old Hebrew term *maqôm*, for places of worship (Deut. 12:2, 3, 5, 11, etc.) has been preserved as a designation of churches. For instance, a Christian at Kefr Kenna spoke of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem as a *maqâm*, and a Christian at Nazareth said that the monastery on Mount Carmel was known not only as a *kenêseh* (church), and *deir* (monastery), but also as a *maqâm*. Until about twenty years ago, according to the testimony of one of the most trustworthy pastors in Palestine, sexual excesses were practiced at the annual festival of the prophet Elijah, within the inclosure of the monastery on the top of Mount Carmel. Such excesses may be considered survivals of the ancient licentiousness on the high places, described by the prophet Hosea (4: 13, 14). There are doubtless survivals among

the Nusariyeh of similar customs. The "holy"¹ men are said to gather in a room in connection with their sacred rites. The lights are turned out, and men and women give themselves over to promiscuous orgies. A similar survival is found at Nejjar at the great festival in honor of Hasan and Hosein. According to the testimony of a sacred sheikh at Tyre, who spent two years in pilgrimage, the servant of the shrine offers



Photograph by Professor L. B. Paton.

THE FOUNTAIN OF THE VIRGIN AT NAZARETH.

(Crosses and splotches of henna may be observed on the back wall underneath the arch.)

women as temporary wives to the pilgrims, for a week or more. The Shiites find justification for such marriages in their edition of the Koran: "I will give you liberty to marry² and liberty to go free." The Persian girls come for the purpose, and, in order to be distinguished from other women, they put a distinctive ring in the ear, so that they may marry pilgrims. The pilgrim goes

¹ As all Semitic scholars know, one term for prostitute is *qēdēsha*, "holy one" or "priestess" (Gen. 38:21, 22; Deut. 23:18; Hos. 4:14); cf. *Primitive Semitic Religion Today* (Chicago, 1902), pp. 149, 150.

² The Arabic word *mi'aeḥ* signifies to marry for a certain number of days. This pilgrim was authority for the statement that the same kind of marriage exists at Mecca.

to such a girl and says: "O woman, will you marry me for a certain number of days?"

An indirect confirmation of the survival of such ancient rites at Mount Carmel, until at least two decades ago, was given by an aged Christian at Kefr Kenna, who said that, when his father spoke of performing a vow at Mount Carmel, a neighbor said: "If you wish to be with the *benât en nas*³ ("daughters of men," a euphemism for "prostitutes"), you need not go to Mount Carmel."

It is the custom of the villagers at the annual festival of the prophet Elijah at the monastery, when inside the inclosure, to practice the ancient heathen revelry, such as Moses saw when he came down from Mount Sinai—singing, dancing, feasting and general rejoicing (Exod. 32: 18, 19; cf. 1 Cor. 10: 7), according to the primitive customs of each village. The monks ignore this ancient Semitism by shutting up the doors of the monastery and retiring to their cells.

The form of ancient sacrifice is preserved, though it is perhaps exceptional. At the last festival some villagers sacrificed a sheep at the door of the church, and sprinkled the blood on the left post and lower part of the door, as may be clearly seen in the picture below. Others offer their sacrifices before the image of the Virgin near the well.⁴

The worship of a sacred stone survives, near the top of little Hermon, about three hours from Nazareth, two hundred yards north of the Moslem shrine of Nebi-Daḥî. It is over five feet high and has a natural pediment. We were told by our Moslem informants that this stone is called *hajar nâṣira*, "Stone of Nazareth." It is believed Christ leaned against it. Christians from Nazareth are said to slay their victims on the natural pediment and put the blood on the top of the stone. It is evident that this custom is as truly a survival of ancient Semitism as that among

³ According to Professor J. Stewart Crawford, of the Syrian Protestant College at Beirût, this is the common term for such women, who are not regarded with especial aversion, as their calling is considered as fixed by divine decree.

⁴ The old Semitic idea of such a well is that it is sacred; cf. later the account of the well in the inclosure of St. George and of Usai at Beirût.

the Beni Sugar,⁵ when they go to Beisân and put stripes of blood on a long upright stone before the shrine of el-Halebi,⁶ to which the *mudîr's*⁷ wife recently offered sacrifice.⁸

At Sidon I sought to get information from the agent of the Presbyterian mission there, and was assured by the veteran mis-



THE DOORS OF THE CHURCH ON MOUNT CARMEL.

(Sacrificial blood may be seen upon the stones at the lower left-hand corner of the doors.)

⁵ The real form is *Beni Sagar*, "sons of the falcon, or hawk."

⁶ This signifies the one from Aleppo.

⁷ The *mudîr* is a local governor. The officer over a province is called a *wâlî*, over a lesser province a *mutesarrîf*, over a county a *caïmacan*, and over a township *mudîr*. Cf. VERNEY ET DAMBMANN, *Les puissances étrangères dans le Levant en Syrie et en Paléatine* (Paris, 1900), pp. 4, 5.

⁸ Here is a case where Arabs living in tents and the delicate women of the town worship at the same shrine. Such an upright stone near a sanctuary may be regarded as a survival of the *mazzebôth*.

sionary, Rev. Samuel Jessup, D.D., that "what that man does not know about the religious customs of the natives is not worth knowing." In the most absolute terms he affirmed that "there is no such thing as sacrifice in Sidon." The next day we not only found this ancient custom in vogue at the shrine of Nebi Saidûn⁹ ("the prophet of Sidon"), but also a survival of the *mazzêba* of ancient Canaanitic worship. Sacrifices are slain at



Photograph by Professor L. B. Paton.

THE STONE OF NAZARETH ON LITTLE HERMON.

(The stone is called in Arabic Hajar Nasara. Christians smear the top of it with blood.)

the threshold of the shrine, and also at the base of a pillar outside the shrine, so that blood spurts upon it. This is washed off, in order that the dogs may not lick it, which would be regarded as a profanation. There are seven or eight other shrines in Sidon, including a sacred tree, said by a woman who was our informant to be indwelt by a female saint, called Sittéh

⁹Undoubtedly the idea underlying this name is that found among the Arabs as well as the ancient Semites, that the inhabitants of Sidon are descended from their progenitor Nebi Saidûn; *cf.* Gen. 10:15.

Leylâ. She may be seen sitting near the tree, with her long hair streaming over her shoulders. She sees and is ready to help¹⁰ those who vow to her.

I had never supposed that in a city so strongly Europeanized as Beirût many traces could be found of the primitive religion, but most of the ancient rites may be recognized, and, according to the testimony of the servants of the shrines, they are observed



A SHRINE OF CHIDR AT BEIRÛT.

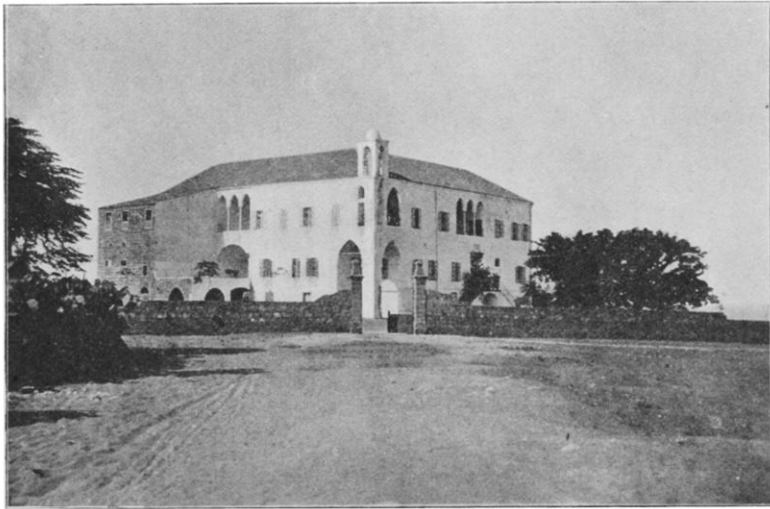
by leading Moslems and Christians. There are at least three famous shrines, two of which are Moslem and one Christian. The Moslem shrines are known as Chidr and Usai; the Christian shrine as Mâr Eliâs. There are quite a number of smaller shrines in Beirût, both Moslem and Christian.

1. The shrine of Chidr,¹¹ called by the Christians Mâr Jirjis (St. George), is surrounded by a court perhaps 100 feet long by 50 feet wide. It is visited by all sects of Moslems and Christians, and is connected with the legend of St. George and the

¹⁰ The term is *ḥâdir-wa-nâdir*; cf. Gen. 16:13.

¹¹ This is the literary form; the name is pronounced *Chudr*.

dragon, from which the bay of Beirût receives its name, St. George's Bay. The richest and most aristocratic families of the city visit it, including Moslems and Christians. The servants receive the usual ancient dues from such animal sacrifices as are brought, namely, a hind quarter, the skin, and the head; sometimes they even have half of the animal (*cf.* Deut. 18: 3; Lev. 7: 33, 34). In one corner of the court is a well of holy water.



THE SHRINE OF MÂR ELIAS AT BEIRÛT.

This water is *deker* ("male"¹²); that is, it has the power of procreation. The blessing of Chidr is in the water, as if he were in it. Barren women bathe in the water, thus having intercourse with him, and get children. Such a child is called Chidr, after his divine father, and must pay a fourth of his value to Chidr all his life. Here we have in Beirût a survival of the ancient Semitic idea of the intermingling of the sons of God (that is, the *aulia*) with the daughters of men (*cf.* Gen. 6: 4).

2. Another shrine on Râs Beirût, down by the sea, is that of Usai Imâm 'Ali. Before reaching it, one passes a sacred plane tree. It is a part of a large complex of buildings. Moslems

¹² The word *deker* also signifies the *membrum virile*.

and some Christians visit this shrine. On the twenty-seventh of Ramadan, the mufti of Beirût, the religious head of the city and province, and the leading people of Beirût come to this *maqâm* and have a service of prayer. They do not permit the ancient custom of dancing, and try to have the service as decorous as possible. But, nevertheless, primitive religion survives in the animal sacrifices of sheep, goats, and bullocks made in payment of vows. A formula used in connection with the death of the victim is: "I kill this sheep as a *fedû* ('redemption') for Abdullah." The one who slays the sacrifice dips his index



THE SHRINE OF USAI IMÂM 'ALI.

(The shrine is marked by the low cupola near the center of the group of buildings.)

finger in blood and daubs it on the forehead of the one for whom the vow was made, and he steps over the blood. Barren women bathe in the water of the well of this shrine, and afterwards bring the boys that are born to them.¹³

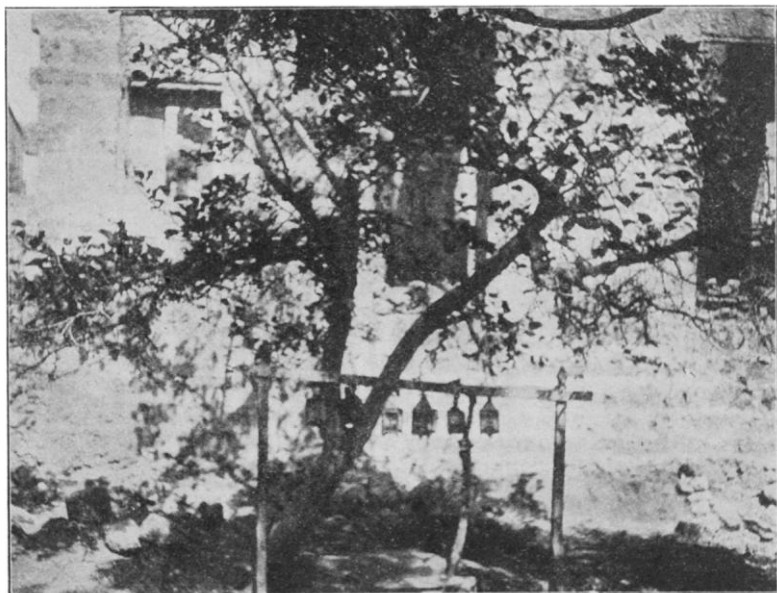
3. At the Greek shrine of Mâr Eliâs, in Beirût, there is an annual festival attended by thousands of people, who, after the old Semitic fashion, dance and sing and carouse (Amos 6:6) while the service is going on. There was once a sacred tree, and the monastery is built over a cave.¹⁴ All sects of Moslems and Christians visit this shrine, although Moslems are excluded from it at the annual festival for fear of bloodshed. The worshippers often bring animal sacrifices. Some of the most aristocratic families of the Greek church visit this shrine.

¹³ There seem to be abundant examples of such births and other wonders.

¹⁴ Cf. W. ROBERTSON SMITH, *Religion of the Semites* (New York, 1889), p. 180.

In this connection the Greek church of Seyide, or en Nuriyeh, in the same city, may be mentioned. It is visited by all sects, including Jews. Many barren Moslem women go to it and say: "Oh, please, Nuriyeh, give me a child!" They kill sheep and goats on the threshold.

There is also a sacred tree, about fifteen feet high, in the Moslem part of the city, called 'Ali Ibn 'Alam. A woman told



SACRED TREE OF 'ALI IBN 'ALAM.

us that the *weli* manifested himself through the tree. There are six lamps hanging in front of it. The people vow animals, generally sheep, and also oil and candles. They kill the sacrifice near the tree and step over the blood. They put oil, instead of blood, on the forehead of the one for whom the vow is made. If anyone who has fever sleeps under the tree, he will recover. The *weli* is often seen as an old man sitting under the tree.

There is a Moslem shrine, known as Sa'id el-Jârah. It is said to have been built over the body of a Turkish soldier killed in battle several hundred years ago. It is situated, near the Arme-

nian cemetery, in the vicinity of the Victoria Hotel, and really almost blocks up the drive down by the bay. The government evidently does not dare to remove it. The *maqâm* is almost daily visited by Moslem women, some of whom are elegantly dressed. Indeed, it is said that Moslems, Jews, and Christians are among the worshipers. Vows are made and sacrifices are offered to the saint.



A MOSLEM SHRINE, WITH SHEEP IN POSITION FOR SACRIFICE.

At Jûneh, in the vicinity of Beirût, beyond the Dog River, there is a curious case of syncretism, where the ancient religion, connected with an artificial cave by the sea, called el-Bâtîyeh, dominates the Maronite church, known as Mâr Jirjis (St. George), some distance away. The cave is thought of as belonging to St. George, but this is a case of the tail wagging the dog. The vows, from which the annual income is about 12,000 piastres (\$480), are made almost altogether at the cave. There are two annual festivals: one on the day when St. George was killed, and the other on the day when he slaughtered the

dragon. "It is just like a fair. There is buying and selling, eating, drinking, dancing, horse-racing, etc." The Maronite religion has eliminated sacrifice in connection with the cave and the church, but otherwise the old Semitic customs remain. Barren couples bathe in the cave,¹⁵ into which the water washes from the sea. St. George makes the marriage fruitful, and all children born after such a bath in the salt water,¹⁶ which has procreative powers, are called George, after their actual sire. Our informant said that about a third of the boys of the village are named George—an evident oriental hyperbole.

If the influence of the Maronite religion has done away with animal sacrifices in fulfilment of vows, in connection with this cave, it has not availed to suppress the offering of sacrifices in connection with the launching of new ships or boats. The neck of a sheep is laid on the prow of the ship or boat, and is cut so that the blood runs into the sea. The victim is then thrown into the bay as a sacrifice to St. George or to Seyide.¹⁷ The boatmen at Beirût related the same custom. There they (Moslems) make a vow either to Chidr or to Usai, and after cutting the throat of the victim they throw the sacrifice into the sea. They believe that through this offering the ship will be safe.

At the centers of Moslem and Christian influence I had many interviews with the religious heads. Some of their testimonies as to the ancient religion are interesting.

1. A Roman Catholic priest at Haïfa:

"The Arabs follow tradition, and do as their fathers and grandfathers have done. It is not surprising, then, that the people of the land put blood on upright stones and consider them as gods. They have inherited the old religion from their fathers."

2. Sheik Hajj Ibrahîm 'Ameis, of Tyre:

"The religion of the *maqâms* is the old heathen religion. The religious heads of the people from the time of Moses did not compel their followers to do what is right, but, in order to get a great party, they allowed the people to do what their fathers had done before them. For this reason one sees the ancient worship spread all over the country. It is general among most of the

¹⁵ Cf. *Primitive Semitic Religion Today*, p. 119.

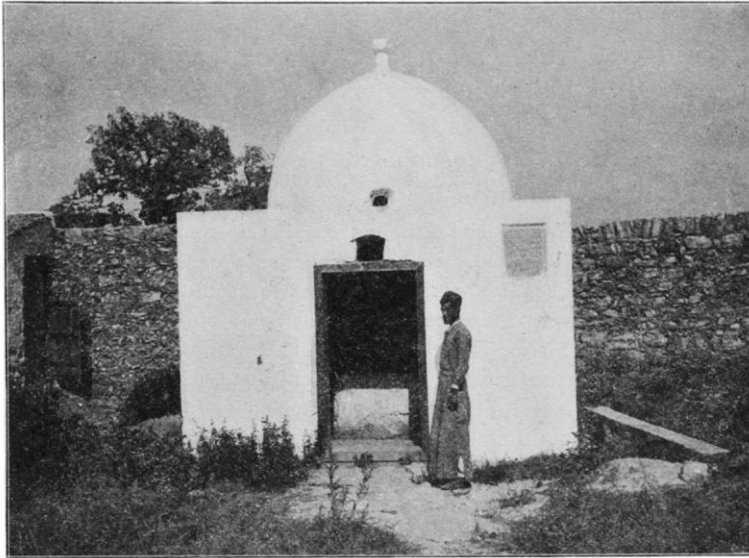
¹⁶ See the *BIBLICAL WORLD* for February, p. 100.

¹⁷ This is certainly an ancient custom.

people. They all practice the same kind of religion. This is in accordance with a verse from the Koran, in the Shiite edition: 'We found our fathers going on a road, and we are going on the same track.' There is no powerful instruction that could lead the people back from their foolish way."

3. Maḥmūd Effendi, of Sidon, said :

"The old religious customs are survivals of heathenism and contrary to the Moslem religion. The number of people who do not think well of the



THE SACRED WELL OF CHIDR.

old religion is increasing. About twenty years ago there were only about 5 per cent. of the Moslems who could read and write. We are trying to teach them the true principles of Islam."

4. Interview with a sheikh of the Metāwileh at Jeba', ninety years of age, who studied twelve years at Kerbala :

"The knowledge of the prophets and *aulia* is known to us before the sciences. It is tradition received from our fathers and grandfathers, which we have submitted to our own judgment and have found to be true. . . . God has created the mind, . . . and when we go to Sujud and hear all the traditions, and what all the people say, and what Sujud has done for them, our minds are satisfied." Query: "Would it be a great loss out of their lives if there were no *mezars*?" Answer: "They would call it a great loss if all the

prophets and their disciples were to be swept away. God would take vengeance on all who should pull down the *makâms*."

5. Sheik 'Abd er-rahmân el-Hût, of Beirût :

"I do not know how old the *mezars* are. We found the Christians believing in the *makâms*, and so we followed them. Moslems and Christians are agreed in an unlawful religion." Query: "Did it not come from ancient times?" Answer: "Yes; perhaps it was used by the fathers, but it is foolishness."

6. The *mufti*, or religious head, of Beirût, said the religion of the shrines had been handed down from before the time of Mohammed, and deplored its hold upon the people, which he attributed to ignorance and foolishness.

I may quote in conclusion from a conversation with Abdu'-Rashîd, shipping agent in Jedda, the port of Mecca :

"There are many shrines for the *aulia*. This is contrary to the Mohammedan religion. . . . Lately the real head of the Moslem religion, the grand sherif of Mecca, ordered that the shrines should be pulled down in Jedda and Mecca, with the exception of the Tomb of Eve, which has been retained, doubtless for sentimental reasons, at the intercession of the foreign consuls. The emîr has carried out the exact idea of our religion. It [*i. e.*, the destruction of the shrines] has been effected in Mecca, and so in time must be brought about throughout the Moslem world."

I close with a quotation from near the end of my last journal :

The general impression I have gained from this journey is that the old religion is a power not only among the bedouins and fellahîn and in the small villages, but also among the great majority of Moslems, including many of the wealthiest and most influential in the largest cities and towns.

This result is much different from what I had expected, and will be subjected to further examination.